Noel Malcolm, Agents of Empire: Knights, Corsairs, Jesuits, and Spies in the Sixteenth-Century Mediterranean World. New York: Oxford University Press. 2015. Pp. xxv, 604. $34.95.

In the *Preface* to this book, which acts as a sort of intellectual and methodological biography of what follows, Noel Malcolm apologetically writes "each time that I turn aside from a biographical narrative to discuss one of these issues, this is not a digression; it is part of the substance of the book" (xvii). He should not have worried. This book is excellent, and its great merit is exactly in successfully embedding a rich prosopographical narrative with in depth analysis of some of the central issues of sixteenth century Mediterranean history.

The book emerged from a classic mix of factors familiar to all scholars engaged in archival research: serendipity and dogged detective work. Malcolm effectively conveyed this to the reader in many instances such as when, on reading a doctoral thesis and recognizing a missing piece of the documentary puzzle, he states how "within ten minutes I had booked a flight to Rome" (xvi), a statement which elicits immediate recognition in scholars dedicated to archival research who cannot but share the enthusiasm bubbling up from his measured prose.

The focus of Malcolm's analysis is on the lives of some of the members of the related Bruti and Bruni families – the 'knights, corsairs, Jesuits and spies' of the book subtitle. They are a most interesting set of characters, from the narrative perspective they provide the 'human interest' element that holds the book together, and provides plenty of interest also for the non academic reader. But, and crucially for analytical scholarly purposes, they provide a multifaceted set of case studies on which the author bases a wide strategic study of early modern Mediterranean which is rare in Anglophone scholarship, usually very specialized and thus narrower in focus.

The Brutis and Brunis were members of those provincial local aristocracies (in this case from Ulcinj in present-day Montenegro) which were an essential element of local governance within Mediterranean empires, in this case principally the Venetian maritime empire, whose complex composition emerges vividly throughout the volume – 'Agents of Empire' indeed. However, their lives and, crucially, their professional careers crossed more than one early modern empire – Venetian, Spanish, Holy Roman and Ottoman – and it was exactly because of their constant crossing of those frontiers, that they can be considered exemplary of early modern Mediterranean multiple identities and permeable societies. In following these, Malcolm sheds light on the daily interplay between high political strategy and the grittier side of diplomatic relations, both in managing political and military action, and in administering fragile colonial holdings in a frontier zone.

The diverging interests of European powers active in the sixteenth century Mediterranean fostered a constant need for renegotiation between different powers and individuals, and on a structural level these interactions are the real protagonists of the volume. Malcolm displays a nuanced understanding of diplomatic language and activities at all levels: from small-time spies at the local level to mid-ranking double agents and high-ranking ambassadors in the lofty halls of power. His sophisticated analysis of intelligence activities, and his ability in decoding cultural nuances and subtleties allows him to unpack for the reader the intricacies of diplomatic work and the complexities which, then as now, characterize information networks, thus effectively and convincingly conveying that constant processing and evaluating of information at many levels: local, regional, international and supranational. Local events are analysed in detail and, at the same time,

always connected to long term developments so as to contextualize them and debunk simplistic traditional narratives, a good example being his sharp analysis of Muslim-Christian conflict at the end of the sixteenth century (426-7), measured, detailed and utterly to the point.

Malcolm is also a gifted writer, his mastery of languages and historiographies is worn lightly, and his clear prose is enlivened by witty asides. Thus he successfully manages to embody a British tradition of high-brow popular history, written for that elusive traditional reader – the well-educated gentleman – paired with the depth and nuance of 'professional' academic history. This is always a rare feat, and this book is a masterpiece of the genre, recommended reading for everyone interested not only in the early modern Mediterranean but in the history of diplomacy and intercultural relations in any time and place.